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ABSTRACT

In recent years, many in anthropology have been challenging the positivist paradigm that dominated the field, with its assumption of the researcher as a transparent data gatherer and the notion of data as something to be collected through fieldwork. Questions of qualitative research methodology are also surfacing in education even as the divisions between intellectual disciplines are increasingly becoming blurred. The more one studies the foundations of research inquiry, the more one finds that issues of methodology and the participation of the researcher are complex in the extreme. Qualitative research is often associated with moral implications that cause deep pain, and there are few examples in the literature that help the researcher ensure that the study does no harm. How informed are the participants who indicate informed consent? Who are the real authors of a study? Should children even be the subjects of research? How important are emotions to the research process? All of these questions must be examined in order for qualitative researchers to take the ethical challenges of qualitative research as seriously as they deserve. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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Comments on

Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research

(Session organizer: Liora Bresler)

by

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First, I want to thank my colleague Liora Bresler for organizing this session, and the participants for creating such lively and provocative sources for our collective reflection. It's an honor for me, an outsider to the discipline, to be asked to join in this distinguished public conversation, which I suspect may well prove something of an event, and I hope that my own discipline of anthropology can add something to today's discussion.

I was delighted to see much the sort of welcome self-reflection in these papers outside my field about the ethical foundations and challenges of qualitative research that is happily occurring in my own discipline of anthropology. In recent years, many in anthropology have begun challenging the positivist paradigm that long dominated the field, with its assumption of the researcher as transparent, even robotic data-gatherer, and the notion of "data" itself as constituting so much dendritus to be vacuumed up by the mechanical suction of fieldwork. Some years ago, for example, feminist anthropologt Joan Cassell began prodding us to think about the human qualities of fieldwork in a monthly column that she edited for our umbrella association's national newsletter in which she solicited researchers in all subdisciplines of anthropology to send in short letters for publication detailing ethical dilemmas they encountered in the course of fieldwork, without necessarily specifying how (or if) they resolved them. Readers were then invited to comment publicly on the incident in the next issue, and to offer their own suggestions for how the dilemma might be (or might have been) handled. Quite often, a surprising range of possible solutions were offered by several authors independently, and this fact alone served to shake us out of any complacent sense that there might be a single "right" answer to a moral dilemma. Cassell went on to publish a selection of the most provocative and instructive of these fascinating cases as a book (Cassell and Jacobs 1987; cf. also Appell 1978). Our reflections on the issues continue, whether it be a long-overdue article by

Srivastava asking us to consider the under-theorized but critical issue, "Should Anthropologists Pay Their Respondents?" (1992), or a very wise piece problematizing the term "native anthropology" (Narayan 1993; cf. Jones 1988); a volume highlighting the construction of field notes (Sanjek 1990), or narratives focusing on the ethical pitfalls encountered--often continually--in the course of fieldwork (e.g. Dumont 1978; Gottlieb and Graham 1994; Sanjek 1993); investigations into the difference that gender makes in qualitative research (e.g. Golde 1986; Whitehead and Conaway 1986), or reflections on the hidden collaborations that undergird much of anthropology without being acknowledged as such (Gottlieb 1996).

So in view of this growing set of reflexive contributions in my own field, I was delighted to encounter the contributions of our panelists today, giving me insight into similar issues as seen in a related but somewhat different intellectual and methodological terrain. I began with this comment on what has been going on in the sister discipline of anthropology, but in truth, the disciplinary boundary to which I have alluded is a fragile one at best. In mid-century, affordable air travel combined with the wide dissemination of the printed word to make multiple systems of knowledge readily accessible--of note is the international character of our own panelists--while E-mail now makes possible regular, even daily, usually cost-free conversations among colleagues around the world. These three general factors have combined with other more directly related ones--the proliferation of interdisciplinary journals, the creation of interdisciplinary programs and departments on university campuses internationally, the possibility of interdisciplinary team-teaching in universities, the staging of interdisciplinary conferences, the constitution of interdisciplinary grant review panels, to name just some--to make the intellectual frontiers between the artificially created academic disciplines even more flimsy now than the "blurred genres" to which Clifford Geertz called our attention seventeen years ago (1980).

I view this interdisciplinary urge toward reassessment of the ethical foundations of

our research as anything but coincidence. I wish I could claim responsibility by my discipline for diffusing our wisdom, but I'm afraid I have to be more realistic, for I see this convergence as indicative of a broader, late-century trend toward questioning norms while trying to find justice in an insistently multicultural world. Are our research subjects really so passively disinterested in the research process as we may have once un-self-consciously presumed? By contrast, if some of our informants are now our friends, what difference does that make for how we make minute-by-minute decisions as we go about conducting our research? What about if our informants are our colleagues? What about if they are our students? Our parents? Our bosses? Ourselves?? No matter what our academic field or the specific topic of our inquiry, those of us who pursue any form of what is commonly termed "qualitative" research can no longer presume a simple researcher/subject relation whose ethical norms are transparent and unproblematic. By contrast, as the papers we've heard this afternoon demonstrate beautifully, the more we interrogate the foundations of the research endeavor, the more we discover that the issue is fraught with complexities that are difficult to imagine, yet about which our reflections repay us many times over in the creation of a heightened ethical stance vis-à-vis our research community and our career paths alike.

Nevertheless, many who have begun to write about the moral implications of qualitative research have often averred the deep pain that the process may have caused. In my own case, my husband and I did not even begin to write about the ethical aspects of our fieldwork in West Africa before a full seven years had elapsed after our return to the U.S. In good part, this was because much of what we had experienced in the course of my research was so ethically troubling that we needed a long span of time before beginning to grapple with it. How could we write about our difficulty in answering a villager's request to transport tusks of an illegally shot elephant to town, our decision to take our village chief to court, our witnessing of a bride's rape, in a way that was both honest about our own

reactions and instructive for future researchers? These were not the sorts of research challenges for which I had been prepared in my graduate training. While these dilemmas may appear more dramatic than most, I suspect that everyone in this room has encountered some troubling incidents in the course of doing research that have occasioned plenty of private soul-searching, and for which a richer written corpus would have been at least of some help in trying to carve a minimally damaging response.

Thankfully, our panelists today go a long ways toward introducing their own insights into such issues. Our authors group themselves into three closely related but nevertheless somewhat distinct camps--those who focus on theoretical reflections (Erickson), those who focus on ethnographic case study (Sabar and Bushnick), and those who try to offer a combination of the two (Bresler; Goodson and Fliesser). Each is fascinating in its own right--clearly theory and ethnography are both independently suggestive and mutually enriching.

Liora Bresler points out that ethical norms for qualitative social scientific research in general seem to have their roots in psychology, and that if this philosophical basis was once appropriate, it is now clear that this will no longer do. The people among whom we qualitative researchers conduct our research are best not viewed as "subjects," and whatever the differences among them and the settings in which we find them--whether it be an elementary school classroom in Tel Aviv or a village in West Africa, a marketplace in rural Mexico or a gay bar in Soho--they most certainly do not sit still for us to inspect them in a lab.

Related to this, Erickson challenges us to rethink exactly how "informed" the signers of those so-called Informed Consent Forms really are when they sign on the dotted line. Indeed, Bresler provides a general orientation for the session in insisting that the ritualized signing of the Informed Consent Form is just the beginning rather than the end of

what a properly reflexive stance should be toward those who provide us with our "data." This is so for several reasons. First, such a signature traditionally served primarily to absolve the researcher of any responsibility for the continuing welfare of the research community, and that is no longer acceptable at a moral level. Secondly, as Goodson and Fliesser demonstrate so tellingly, people who are involved in research projects in the role of what was once called "subjects" may themselves undergo significant transformation as a result of the process, and it is now incumbent on us as researchers to take into account such transformations--in some cases, as Goodson has done, to offer coauthorship.

I applaud Goodson for this bold but all too rare move. Authorship is indeed a highly undertheorized issue in the social sciences at large. For example, it has recently been noted by some scholars that women have often contributed to their husbands' research as equal partners and are then given thanks in acknowledgments rather than in the byline (Bruner 1991, Gottlieb 1996). Thus it was only when Edith Turner began to publish her own books on Ndembu religion (1987, 1992), based on the field notes that she herself took while in Zambia, that anthropologists came to recognize the centrality of her contribution to the fieldwork--and career--of her late husband, the much celebrated Victor Turner (Engelke 1997). Edith Turner went on to list her Virginian student assistant as well as her Ndembu field assistants as coauthors for one of those books that she published after her husband's death (Turner et al. 1992). As others have noted in different contexts, sometimes those who have been mistreated are especially sensitive to issues of injustice, and are willing to take unusual steps to redress it. A different sort of authorial reassessment has taken place in the work of Melford Spiro, who published a work of Israeli ethnography, Children of the Kibbutz as a single author (Spiro 1958) but has recently issued a second edition of the book in which his wife, is listed as joint author (Spiro and Spiro 1996)--a welcome but presumably long-overdue credit. How many more of such authorial revisions will we be seeing in the coming years? How many more should

we see?

On another note, we are coming to recognize the worlds of difficulties that can plague the researcher and his or her research community as a result of research for which "informed consent" may have readily been offered. Certainly anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes never anticipated the dramatic denunciation of her work by her very literate "subjects"--become very active agents indeed--that would follow upon the publication of her ethnography of a small Irish town, Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics (1979). This is even more of an issue for you in the education field than it has been in anthropology, as many of my discipline's "informants" have been nonliterate and thus the possibility of them disapproving of our interpretations less likely. But as the world becomes increasingly literate, the possibility of our research subjects reading--and reading critically--our work becomes ever more likely, and even researchers such as myself who work with populations whose members are still overwhelmingly nonliterate no longer have the luxury of imagining that they, or their children or grandchildren, will forever remain nonliterate. The last time my husband and I returned to our fieldsite in Côte d'Ivoire, we brought back with us copies of three books from our stays among them. My ethnography of Beng religion was of mild, polite interest; our jointly authored memoir of our stay was of somewhat more interest; but to my great surprise, the work that clearly caught the collective imagination of these mostly non-literate villagers was my Beng-English dictionary. This was a work that was quite tangential to my life as a scholar but that proved central in the assessment of my value by my village hosts and hostesses precisely because of their realization that literacy is increasingly important even in seemingly remote villages, and their further acknowledgment that English is the major world language and as such is of utility to the future generation. If mostly nonliterate peasants take such an interest in the work of their researchers, how much more involved should a hyper-literate community

such as educators and students have in our research about them!

For scholars working in school settings, children occupy a position of potential invisibility that makes them similarly vulnerable to invisibility or even abuse. As with nonliterate populations, the issue of a critical readership may not bypass them for much longer. Erickson notes that "the people studied in qualitative educational research can read for themselves"--this is not only true for teachers and administrators; it is, or will soon be, true for students as well. Thus it seems to me that ethnographers of the schools must exert extra-special sensitivity especially in their chronicling of classroom and extra-classroom dynamics--issues that can cause great pain to children, with their delicately balanced "in-groups" and "out-groups" that are constantly being negotiated.

Related to this is the even more fundamental issue of which children ought to be studied by researchers in the first place. As Erickson mentions, an "informed consent form" is now required in the U.S. for research with children in junior and senior high schools; but he acknowledges that the same is not true of elementary school students, who are seen in effect as being the property of their parents, who are empowered with decision-making authority without any legal requirement for anyone to consult the young children themselves. Is this just? Perhaps. But before accepting it uncritically, surely we ought to interrogate the practice and its philosophical premises. Scholars are now beginning to investigate the extent to which children are especially vulnerable to abuse in the late twentieth century, as with Sharons' (1995) collection of articles on how the world economy has shaped childhood in deleterious ways even in seemingly remote outposts. Ethical and methodological norms for research with children are just beginning to be articulated--I am thinking of the recent slim but invaluable volume by Fine and Sandstrom (1988). I predict that as we continue to subject our disciplinary practices to closer scrutiny, our all-too-common erasure of volition by young children will come to be questioned too, and we may be forced to articulate far more nuanced imperatives in our relations even with

the youngest of children.

Mention of children leads me to the question of emotions, something that children surely produce in adults, whether as researchers, teachers or parents. I am quite taken by Bresler's general insistence that what has passed for an easy moral position of the researcher now must be constantly interrogated and re-interrogated as we acknowledge the changing agency of our "informants" and consultants, but I am made a little uneasy by her discussion of the importance of emotions in restaking a new moral territory. In theory it sounds good; but whose emotions, and which ones? Will everyone react with the same emotions given the same situation? In anthropology, we have begun to come terms with the counterintuitive proposition that emotions themselves may be constructed in subtle but deeply cultural ways. To take an extreme and not-so-subtle but nevertheless instructive example: a devout Nazi would have reacted with pride at a rally of Hitler, while a member of the Resistance would have reacted with disgust. These emotions would be genuine enough--indeed emotions for which the individuals would, and did, fight to the death--but it is clear that they do not originate with the individual and the individual alone. Applying the logic of this admittedly dramatic example to the issue at hand: basing a new, subtler and more context-sensitive sense of morality vis-à-vis our research community on the field of emotional reactions--Does it feel right?--seems a potentially problematic solution that may cause as many unanticipated difficulties as our previous negligence of the field of morality altogether has caused. Indeed, Bresler herself seems to imply this in her brilliant example of the Goldilocks syndrome gone awry, with her own sudden insight into its culturally biased foundation.

Thus I do think that Bresler is on the right track in discussing the issue of emotions in general--an undeservedly avoided topic in the social sciences at large. Surely researchers, as human beings, are continually subject to emotional reactions in their

research, and such reactions must be interrogated if the research endeavor is to be understood. In her study on the Psychoanalytic Aspects of Fieldwork, Jennifer Hunt (1989) has provoked us to imagine what it is that we bring with us from our own biographical narratives to the research we carve out for ourselves, and such emotional baggage indeed shapes the decisions we make during research in ways that remain unconscious--thus unanswerable--if we do not give them much serious thought. The West Africanist Simon Ottenberg (1990), for example, has acknowledged that he wrote up his field notes in the meticulous and comprehensive way that he did while doing research in Nigeria because he always had his advisor, the well-known founder of African studies in the U.S., Melville Herskovits, looking over his shoulder, for intimate, ultimately Oedipal-like reasons that Ottenberg lays out. If such admissions border on the embarrassing, they are nonetheless revelatory, allowing us to realize the very personal basis for decisions that appear simply professional, normative.

Finally, I want to comment briefly on Sabar and Bushnick's forays into assisting Israeli teachers to forge a new set of standards for ethical behavior on the job. This is indeed a salutory task, and one that undoubtedly will prove more and more challenging as the authors continue their involvement. I look forward, perhaps, to a sequel in which the authors consider the ethical dilemmas that may envelop them in their own role in this project. For example: What happens when teachers offer conflicting perspectives? Whose will be given weight?

In conclusion, the talks we have been privileged to hear today offer an inspirational set of reflections that should encourage the next generation of qualitative researchers in the field of education to take seriously the ethical challenges posed by the very research endeavor. With works such as these as a beacon, future researchers should indeed find their way clarified through foggy terrain as the task and demands of education loom ever

more critical, its risks ever more high-stakes, and its rewards ever more pleasurable, in the world we both inhabit and create.

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